Original Paper – Research Methods

Discovering Meanings in Research with Children

Karen Liang Guo
Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand

Key words: phenomenology, interpretive, meaning, child informants, participant perspectives, children’s voices

Drawing on a qualitative research study this paper explores the aspect of ascribing meanings in research. It presents an example of research with young children which illustrates a ‘meaning-seeking’ experience. Ascribing meaning is an external realisation of an inner thought, with the emphasis on the uniqueness of children’s own voices and the researcher’s commitment to seeking information from children’s sociocultural contexts. A strong rationale for the importance of meaning in human experiences can be located in phenomenology. The idea of meaning as having its basis in social interactions has been manifested in the sociocultural paradigm. It is argued here that the phenomenological and sociocultural emphasis on ‘meaning’ as the core of life experiences constitutes a useful conceptual perspective which can guide research with children. This emphasis encourages researchers to explore research issues from research participants’ perspectives, grasp their interpretive frame, and understand the meanings that participants bring to them. This in turn provides a means for reaching a profound understanding of human actions, experiences and existence.

Introduction

This paper discusses an issue of qualitative educational research that is related to matters of ascribing meanings. It focuses on a methodological question: how can researchers ascribe meanings to the experiences of young children? With reference to a qualitative study with young children, this paper attempts to address this question from both phenomenological and sociocultural approaches regarding talking with children.

Qualitative research relating to an investigation into life experiences often makes explicit reference to the need to understand these experiences (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). In Hallberg’s words, “the world of lived experiences is the field of qualitative research and its main concern is to understand” (2008, p.66). While the attempt to understand sounds simple, it is hard to achieve in research because it involves an answer to the question of ‘what do they mean?’. According to Ziff (1972), to understand is difficult because life experiences are structurally complex and they differ across people and places. Putman views meanings as “mental entities” (1996, p.157). It is almost impossible for a researcher to think in the same terms as a research participant.
The most authentic way of exploring human experience is to be inside the experience (Bray, Lee, Smith & York, 2000). Researchers therefore need to make sense of the meaning that research participants bring to their actions (Hallberg, 2008). Whether from a social science or postmodernist point of view, the purpose of qualitative research is to “understand and describe meaningful social action” (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p.27). This desire for meaning in research has also been extended to talking with children and was popularised in the last decade through the work and influence of many qualitative researchers in early childhood education (Brennan, 2000; Briggs, 2007; Carr, 2001; Penn, 2005; Richards, 2009; Smith, Duncan & Marshall, 2005). Their experiences indicate the value of taking into account children’s perspectives in research.

This paper discusses the practice of talking with young children to understand their meanings of their learning experiences. The central impetus for this practice comes from recognising the importance of researchers “taking an insider perspective” (Hallberg, 2008, p. 66). It is to think about ways in which children’s voices can be listened to and included in research. The focus of these discussions is in accordance with both phenomenological and sociocultural perspectives which stress the importance of meaning to research and in life.

### Obtaining Meaning in Research: Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology is rooted in the assumption that “there are many ways of interpreting the same experience, [but] the meaning of the experience to each person is what constitutes reality” (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2002, p.447). According to Bryman (2004, p.14), “phenomenology views human behaviour …as a product of how people interpret the world”. Bryman argues that researchers’ attempts to hear the voices of the participants are at the heart of phenomenological research. The application of a phenomenological perspective is to explore conscious experience from the first person’s point of view.

Of particular importance in phenomenological research is the attention of researchers to the meanings of the experiences being studied (Bryman, 2004). According to Edmund Husserl (1931/1977), the founder of phenomenology, behind any phenomenon is ‘intentionality’, which is one’s directed consciousness about an event. In this view, a phenomenologist intends not only to see how but also why an experience becomes part of the life of their participants. The combination of identifying and understanding meaning has been highlighted as vital to achieving the aims of phenomenological research (Schultz, Walsh & Lehnert, 1967). So there are two key ideas underlying the observable phenomena: motivations and meanings.

### Gaining Meaning in Life: Sociocultural Perspectives

A comprehensive sociocultural conception of meaning comes from Lev Vygotsky, who considered learning and development to focus particularly on understanding and constructing meanings of life experiences. For example, Zinchenko, who analyzed Vygotsky’s ideas wrote that “the cognitive aspect of thinking is fixed in meaning” (1985, p.100). According to Vygotsky (1978), meaning is embedded in one’s social and cultural encounters; people create, negotiate and apply meaning through social interactions within their cultures.

In particular, Vygotsky’s concept of mediation (1978) promotes a dynamic perspective on the relationship between meaning and learning by acknowledging the influence of social and cultural contexts on people’s learning and development. He argues that one’s contact with the world is a mediated process, and learning is the result of mediation between actions and
meanings that individuals bring to their actions. For Vygotsky, social relationships are the most important mediator for learning (Daniels, 2005). Mediation occurs when people interact with others.

Through his concept of the cultural mode of representation, a close follower of Vygotsky, Marx William Wartforsky (1979) provided a direct explanation of meanings in life. For Wartfosky, the cultural mode of representation, namely distinctively cultural practices that one undertakes should be explored in order to understand the meanings in one’s life. Wartforsky explained the social and cultural practices as a way to retain and manifest cultural meanings operated within human production of means of existence.

From sociocultural perspectives, the use of language in social practices is the most typical way of ascribing meaning in lived experiences. Talking through language is a constructive act that invokes not only an expression of mind but a meaningful and purposeful discovery of life meanings. Given that “language is the prime vehicle for the conveyance of meaning” (Cruse, 1990, p.77), cultural practice through language frames one’s discovery of life meanings.

It can be seen here, with reference to both the phenomenological and sociocultural approaches that there are two main themes running through the process of discovering meaning: a self-interpretation and a social-construction. Language is clearly an important tool in this process. This understanding of meaning-seeking is fundamental to research, particularly to research design. From both phenomenological and sociocultural perspectives, it is clear that meaning is never merely given; it is so deeply rooted in people’s thinking and acting on their unique life situations that it is almost impossible for one to imagine how others make sense of their world. Seen in this way, successful understanding of a qualitative research event builds on the perspectives of research participants.

**Children as Meaning Constructors**

A current focus of educational research with children attends to the way that children are active constructors of their life experiences. Walsh claims, “the child is seen not as creating the world but as socially recreating it” (1991, p.116). Research from this perspective is tied to children’s perspectives, and understanding children’s experiences is seen as synonymous with an understanding of the meanings they give to life. This perceptual orientation has broadened the focus from previously only watching children to inviting their opinions (Briggs, 2007; Smith, Duncan & Marshall, 2006).

When insiders’ perspectives become the basis for ascribing the meaning in qualitative research, then the voices of children should be given value. Danaher and Briod (2005) presented an argument against the traditional phenomenological way of talking only with knowledgeable and articulate adults. They contend that while infants and young children might have limited communication competence, phenomenological researchers should not underestimate that but attempt to recognise and include children’s voices.

The above viewpoints suggest that it is significant to invite children’s opinions of their life experiences to gain meanings in research. In line with this perspective, the research study that I conducted with the aim of understanding a group of Chinese immigrant children’s learning experiences in New Zealand early childhood centres placed a strong reliance on the children’s perspectives.

In this paper I will discuss some of my experiences surrounding an attempt to ascribing meaning with children in research. By drawing on my research with the Chinese immigrant young children in two different phases of data gathering: the pilot phase and the main phase,
and comparing the children’s experiences of providing their opinions in these two phases, this paper puts ‘meaning-seeking’ with children in perspective, recognises its significance and limitations, and explores ways in which children’s voices can become valid sources of information.

About My Research and Child Interviews

Extended conversations conducted in the children’s own language, supported by the tools that are culturally meaningful to them, provide a useful way of seeking children’s meanings in line with the sociocultural theorising (Brennan, 2000; Robbins, 2002). Drawing upon this idea, my exchange of verbal information with the participating Chinese children proceeded as conversations through using the same types of cultural tools that children themselves might use. In this way, I sought to gain “a greater insight into their [children’s] thinking and the activities in which it is embedded” (Robbins, 2002, p.13).

During the interviews, I used our common first language, Mandarin Chinese, as the key cultural tool, and the process was supported by five stories constructed around five typical life experiences for young children. The topics of these stories included being at home for a day, starting the day at the early childhood setting, free play time, playing with peers, and playing with a teacher. These stories were presented in pictorial forms. When I showed the child a picture created for each story and told the story, I expected the child to continue it and make a similar one.

Data were gathered in two phases: the pilot phase and the main study phase. The pilot study was conducted to test the appropriateness of the research methods regarding the efficacy of my approach to the data gathering in drawing out the children’s experiences. In the following section I will provide two narratives, from each of these two phases and then make a comparative analysis of these two experiences.

My pilot study involved two Chinese children: Kevin aged 4 years and 7 months and Tanya, aged 3 years and 6 months. The names given to the children in this paper are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

I was aware of the importance of having children understand me and being understood. Therefore I spoke slowly and tried to be as clear as I could. With the help of one of his teachers, Kevin sat down with me. The teacher left us as soon as Kevin started talking. I presented to Kevin the five stories, one after the other. He appeared interested but when I asked him to make his own stories he did not seem keen to speak. The answer ‘I don’t know’ characterised his response to my questions and I obtained very little information from him. The child was quiet and I noticed him examining my face.

Unlike Kevin, Tanya joined me in conversation without the support of a teacher and she seemed very willing to talk to me. Although she appeared interested in the stories, I was surprised to discover that Tanya also contributed little to the stories. She kept saying, ‘you tell me’. Like Kevin, Tanya also said ‘I don’t know’ in many conversational turns. Tanya appeared to have difficulty in giving her opinions. About an hour after our conversation Tanya came up to me and said: “I was wrong. Hong (the child in the story) did not like playing with peers. She liked playing on her own”.

The conversations with Kevin and Tanya did not provide me with the information I expected and when Tanya told me about changing her words, I became sceptical about the legitimacy and validity of the children’s replies. I realised that seeking opinions from young children in research can be confounded by their willingness to talk and their ability to express what they are thinking. The way in which children participate in interviews can be influenced by their
view of the researcher as a teacher or an adult, and cultural expectations around respect and listening, or fear of being wrong. Notwithstanding the significance of gaining meanings with children in research outlined above, it appeared a challenging task.

Obviously meanings could not be derived from only one attempt to talk with the children. The pilot study provided me with insights that led to a reshaping of my main study. The pilot interviews indicated that the children could be hesitant to talk, or had trouble constructing stories and relating the stories. When doing the main study I instead used the stories only as a starting point and conversed with the children in a natural way about what they wanted to say and do. I briefly told the children the story, using the pictures to set the scene for the conversations and encouraged the children to talk about their own experiences.

Sumsion (2003, p.22) advises researchers to use the principles of “humility, reciprocity and community” to guide their interviews with children, to establish a productive research relationship with them and to eventually gain valuable information. In saying so, she means that researchers should respect children, allow them to make decisions about the interview and interact with children as equals. My pilot study showed that a strict focus on the stories did not work, because the children did not have opportunities to make their own conversational choices in interviews.

Reflecting on my experience of interviewing Kevin in the pilot study, I realised it was useful to build a working relationship with children. It proved to be important to interact naturally with children so they might accept me as a friendly person with whom they loved to talk (Briggs, 2007).

Eight children were involved in the main study interviews. Each interview was conducted at free-play time at the centre and lasted for about 30 minutes. A typical interview session took place when I found the child doing something by him/herself. I asked the child to sit with me in a quiet place. After playing for a short while with the child, I would say, “Let me tell you a story about Hong (an imaginary Chinese child)”. Following that, I told the child each of my stories and then asked: “I have finished my story. Hong watches TV before she sleeps. How about you then? What do you do at home?” I guided each child to move to his/her early childhood centre experiences by, for example, saying ‘Hong goes to her centre with her dad. Who sends you here? Why do you come here?” My intention of learning about each child’s perception of his/her experiences at home and in the centre was incorporated naturally in conversations with the child in line with the child’s cues and responses.

As mentioned above, upon reflection of the pilot study, I realised that the children’s ‘performance’ during our interviews could also stem from their sense of me as a conversational partner and my approach of communication, and their attempt to keep themselves safe from giving a ‘wrong’ answer. Silence or speaking little could be a preferred option if the children perceived me as demanding of information or judgemental of their replies. These reflections led me to see the significance of adapting my demeanour and approach to be more relaxed and responsive and allow more time for the children to reply. When only the beginnings of the stories were presented the children seemed to worry less about their answers being right or wrong.

As a result of my more relaxed, flexible and responsive approach in the main study, all the children provided information to the stories. For example, Xiaohan aged four years and eight months spontaneously spoke at length about herself and her experiences without much help. When a child was speaking, I mainly smiled, listened and gave brief expressions such as ‘oh’. During the interviews, some children drew pictures.
Making sense of children’s learning experiences through talking with them seemed to be a possibility through using this approach to interviewing. Compared with the pilot study, the children in the main study were provided with freedom to choose their own forms of conversations and they were in control of the moves of the interviews. When conducted in the form of these ‘child-directed’ conversations, the interviews of the children contributed a lot of data.

It is worth mentioning at the final part of this section that I choose the interview locations in a quiet place within the early childhood centres. Other research indicates that children are empowered to talk if they choose the location for interviews (Briggs, 2007). The children in my study may have contributed even more information had I asked them to “find a place for us to talk?”

A Child-Focused Data Gathering Approach

One traditional approach that facilitates validation of data in research is ‘triangulation’. In this approach, more than two data sources are incorporated so that researchers can “give a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation” (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 2006, p.117). With respect to my research, the approach of triangulation was evident in the ways in which the children were both watched and listened to. The dual methods of research conversations with the children, along with observations of their involvement in educational programmes were a means of providing research validity in my study.

In thinking further about Tanya who told me to change her story after our interviews, it may have been possible that what all the children said were simply their views at the moment of the interviews. AsCole (1998) points out, each situation is a different situation, “in that it has different meanings for the participants” (p.25). In her own research study with young children, Richards (2009) similarly reported that children related to her differently in different situations. Such differences make it difficult for researchers to ascribe consistent and valid meanings.

If one considers these possibilities, it is apparent that issues of validity of children’s interview data are important matters that need addressing. By and large children’s perspectives manifest the situations in which they are given. This has led me to believe that reliance on children’s input to gain an understanding of their learning experiences may not be enough on its own. This gives rise to other methods such as observation. Child observation has been a pervasive method in data gathering in qualitative research with young children (Fleer & Robins, 2004; Hedges, 2007; Robins, 2005). Child observations conducted alongside interviews with children may elicit more complete data from children. In my research I discovered the potency of both listening to children and seeing and recording them in action.

While child interview and observation data together may extend knowledge of the child’s meanings, the use of different methods can also highlight inconsistencies and incongruity. The following are examples of congruence and discrepancy of the research data of two children, Rick and Jim, from the child observations and child interviews. In Jim’s case the information about his English usage from the interview and my observation of his behaviour were inconsistent.
**Table 1: Congruence and Discrepancy between Observation and Interview Recordings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Observations</th>
<th>Child Interviews</th>
<th>Information Generated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rick is crawling on the floor. Rick jumps up at the sight of Ben, looking very excited. Rick runs to Ben: “Ben, ni shui xing la. Dao wai bian hao ma?” [Ben, you woke up. Will we go outside?]</td>
<td>Rick: I like playing with Ben. He is my friend.</td>
<td>Rick seeks interactions with Ben and Rick likes playing with Ben.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick is holding a bike and calls loudly in the middle of the playground to Ben who is sitting on a swing. Rick: “Ben, kuai guo lai ya. Wo men qi che!” [Ben, come here quickly. Let’s bike].</td>
<td></td>
<td>(The observation and interview data agree with each other).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(The observation and interview data disagree with each other, therefore, further information is needed on this aspect of Jim’s learning experience).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the process of ascribing meaning to children’s learning experience it is challenging to see how research evidence swirls around the children through different data gathering methods. So what should be done if findings cannot be generated consistently between different sets of data? This question is important to ask in educational research that aims for “a holistic account” (Sherman & Webb, 2001, p.6). If the information gathered from different research methods is inconsistent, researchers are under pressure to develop a holistic account. Put simply, the use of these child-focused research methods requires researchers’ to have ‘super’ abilities to generate coherent findings from incoherent data. Practically, it demands that researchers learn everything about children’s experiences from the children, in order to establish a full articulation of what they have learned. If “children are engaged actors in a sociocultural world” (Weisner, 2002, p.372), the idea of gathering data only from children to understand their learning experiences is problematic.
Ascribing Meanings with Sociocultural Sources

Children’s learning and development are determined in multiple ways, influenced not only by their own behavioural characteristics but also by their learning environment and the people in their environment. Sociocultural perspectives imply that the people with whom they relate in their social and cultural contexts contribute strongly to children’s learning outcomes (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1987). The implication is that “the basic goal of a sociocultural approach to mind is to create an account of human mental processes that recognizes the essential relationship between these processes and their cultural, historical and institutional settings” (Wertsch, 1991, p.6). Sociocultural research, which sees learning as a process of interpersonal meaning making, requires the incorporation of multifaceted collaboration between many people within the same research context. From a ‘triangulation’ point of view, this focus is justified by the use of a variety of data sources and data gathering methods, which go beyond only observing and interviewing children.

In moving away from an emphasis on gaining meaning only from children to seeking information from their sociocultural contexts, research bears out Vygotsky’s analysis of mediation (1978), and considers other people such as parents and teachers as mediators of children’s learning experiences and also the process and outcome of the research. Obtaining meaning in research is, thus, a similar undertaking to children developing themselves into sociocultural beings, involving an essential step of “individual-operating-with-mediational-means” (Wertsch, 1991, p.64). Within this undertaking, the intention of researchers to gain meaning in research is mediated by the sociocultural conceptualisation that people, minds and languages are integrated and socioculturally connected. Researchers and their research participants are interrelated in a sociocultural community in which meanings are shared products of a dialectic unity. The point that the making sense process is a product of children’s cognitive construction and the provisions of their social and cultural world is the key to understanding learning and development (Nelson, 2007).

A particularly powerful example in this regard is found in my research with the Chinese immigrant children. My adoption of the sociocultural theory meant that although my research involved Chinese immigrant children, their lives were inevitably related to others, particularly their teachers and parents. Therefore the voices of all these people were included. Semi-structured individual interviews with Chinese parents and early childhood teachers were conducted after study of each child commenced. It was expected that the parents and teachers would not only provide me with new insights but also help me answer specific questions that had arisen. With opportunities to talk with their teachers and parents I received further information about their learning experiences. For example, in Jim’s case an interview with his mother revealed that: “Jim knows a little English. He has a high expectation for his English proficiency so this little knowledge about English means nothing to him.” His mother’s explanation was useful in throwing light on the data I gathered from Jim. My research has shown me that multiple meanings should be sought, obtained and validated in the sociocultural context in which children participate.

Parent and teacher input also acted to validate the research findings. I gave parents and teachers a copy of the summary account of findings. Their feedback led to revisions and further points were incorporated. I requested parents to ‘brief’ each participating child for any further modifications of the account I had provided. The opportunities that the research provided to the teachers and parents to verify the data with children became another method of triangulation. Within the contexts of teachers and parents sharing the accounts with children, the information was negotiated and established. Through triangulating data in this way, the meaning of the children’s learning experiences was a shared interpretation and
understanding of all significant sociocultural members. The information obtained was meaningful to all within the context of this research.

**Conclusion**

This paper has taken the view that children’s perspectives of their learning experiences are important to consider in research. What changes as researchers move from the simplest exchanges with children to the more complicated task of gaining useful and valid meanings about children’s experiences is the position of an insider’s view of thinking and knowing in a sociocultural context. The phenomenological approach focuses on what researchers can do to obtain an insider’s perspective - a view that regards meaning-making in research to be premised on the intentional states of those being researched. The sociocultural perspective, on the other hand, focus on the interactions of those intentions and the development of a shared and integrated understanding of a research focus.

Rethinking the role of children’s own opinions of their life experiences in research requires conceptions not only of the children as intentional beings who can capably provide information but of information as socioculturally made, and as a shared framework for understanding between children and members of their sociocultural networks. Such rethinking by researchers can provide a more robust foundation for planning and conducting qualitative research.

The idea of communicating and interrelating represents a practice deeply embedded in the phenomenological approach, and is closely tied to the sociocultural notion of mediation. The major argument in this paper has been to do with obtaining meanings of children’s learning experiences from multiple sources, which is collaboratively undertaken. I have argued that an appropriate way of understanding children’s learning and development should go beyond incorporating children’s own opinions to including others from their sociocultural contexts.

Questions about what constitutes good research evidence and what are appropriate ways of gathering qualitative data in early childhood research are always a matter of debate. However, a commitment to and belief in eliciting information from both individual and sociocultural sources is a significant practice.

**References**


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Karen Guo lectures early childhood education at the Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland. In her doctoral research Karen investigated the learning experiences of Chinese immigrant children in New Zealand early childhood centres. Her recent work extends some particular aspects of her doctoral research, focusing on qualitative research in early childhood education, and peer relationships of young children in diverse cultural settings.